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ABSTRACT

Although multiculturalism is praiseworthy, there are various foundational, conceptual issues that art educators need to think about with care and caution. In order to address these issues, this paper describes some personal experiences that impact on the implementation of multiculturalism in the schools. The paper begins with an analysis by T. Bridges (1991) that traces multicultural beliefs to middle class enlightenment notions. The second part of the paper focuses on how religious convictions present obstacles to multiculturalism. (Author/KM)

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The Case Against Multiculturalism, or What About Cultural Relativism?

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Abstract

While personally endorsing multiculturalism, the author raises foundational conceptual issues and describes personal experiences that impact on implementation of multiculturalism in the schools. The paper begins with an analysis by Bridges (1991) that traces multicultural beliefs to middle class Enlightenment notions. The second part of the paper focues on how religious convictions present obstacles to multiculturalism.

The Case Against Multiculturalism, of What About Cultural Relativism?

Like most right thinking American liberals whose values are founded on European-derived notions, I believe multiculturalism to be a good thing for our schools to embrace. I am not here to denounce multiculturalism as an ideal, but to suggest some concepts art educators need to think about with care and caution.

I will begin by quoting a critique of multiculturalism from a journal concerned with philosophical issues in education. Then I will move to a more concrete level to relate an anecdote and discuss its wider implications.

The Critique of the Foundational Concepts of Multiculturalism

Bridges (1991) in a mock Socratic dialogue has a speaker say this:

> Multiculturalists are cultural pluralists whose perspectives and arguments are drawn entirely from the modern European tradition which brought us the Enlightenment and liberal political theory... Far from being free of ethnocentric bias...they are the agents of a particular culture i.e., Modern European culture, whose essential and defining trait is that it takes its own pluralistic cultural standpoint to be universal and normative, identifying it as the standpoint of Universal Reason, a standpoint beyond, above and neutral toward all local cultural value systems or conceptions of the good which shape life and choice in particular communities. (Bridges, 1991, p. 6)

If we move the rhetoric down a rung we could paraphrase this as saying that multiculturalism is a Euro-derived middle class notion. It follows from the idea that there is some means of knowning the world in an objective or "scientific" or "true" way outside the frame of reference built up from our experiences, personal and social. Bridges' speaker implies multiculturalists believe that we can stand outside or above our culture to observe without passion or prejudice.

This is, of course, a view opposed to currently popular belief in the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). In fact, it is to embrace the very hierarchal or culturally imperialistic view multiculturalists deplore. Perhaps some post-modern theory can lead us out of this theoretical dilemma.

Religious Beliefs and Multiculturalism

Now I want to turn to an area of sociocultural life I believe to be a particular problem for multiculturalism: religious beliefs. About religion Bridges has a speaker say:

> Claims which assert the ultimate truth of particularistic local belief systems whether they be Christian or Islamic or Buddhist or whatever simply no longer wash. (Bridges, 1991, p. 7)

Alas, from the standpoint of a Eurocentric bougeouis believer in the possibility of a neutral supracultural outlook they do not wash, but for the true believer in a particular religion they hold the essence of the true and the good. In fact we can imagine the paradoxical spectacle of multiculturalists looking out from their insulated pluralistic world view at believers in a particular religion, while the believers look out from their insulated "particularistic" world on to the alien world of multiculturalistic beliefs, each group equally unaware that there are other belief systems felt to be valid by their holders. As Efland (1988) has pointed out in another context, there are onlooker and participating modes of consciousness. The time beliver uses the participating mode. She or he has internalized the belief system to the degree that personal identity is questioned if the belief system is questioned. I recall reading somewhere an ancedote about an American Indian explaining what Eurocentric culture had done to fellow Native Americans by saying, "You have taken our dreams away from us."

I clashed with the participating mode during one of my last years as a public school art teacher. I had decided to have the students do a project related to Aztec imagery. I began with some slides of Aztec artifacts. The fifth graders I was doing this with seemed to find the work interesting and the chance to make art work in responce to it exciting. Everybody agreed the Aztex codex traditions

was intriguing, the sculpture powerful and wonderfully gruesome, etc. Everything seemed to be set for a fine experience that would lead the students to learning something about the rich heritage of Mexicans.

Then, the following day, a letter from the mother of one of the students came to me. The mother informed me that her child loved Jesus and that he was not even to look at these pictures of devils and demons. I had happened upon the offspring of a local Protestant fundamentalist.

The child was not even to look at "devils" and "demons," the parent's words for the images of the Aztec pantheon. The artifacts, according to this family's view, had no value. Indeed they were worse than worthless. I had to wonder what the sculpture of Subsahara Africa or even of classical Greece would provoke.

I am aware that I could be accussed of not "using anthropologically based methods for identifying...sociocultural groups and their accompanying values and practices which influence aesthetic production" (Wasson, Stuhr & Petrovich-Mwaniki, 1990, p. 238). However, I am also aware that out of a group of 125 students of mixed background, one student – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say one set of parents – proclaimed a particularistic value system that suggests, in the larger scheme of things, a major block to multiculturalism. Are we to equate democratic schooling with majorities? If so, cannot this lead to anti-multiculturalism?

Let us suppose that the class had been composed of a majority of students of Mexican derivation. This minority fundamentalist belief could have been an attempt to block a study of their heritage. Moreover, the attitude displayed by the parents proclaimed that this heritage was the moral equivalent of garbage.

Fundamentalists, whether Protestant, Islamic, Jewish, or Sikh, or some other religion usually hold firm, very firm, beliefs about life and art. These beliefs are not subject to compromise, nor even to tolerant acceptance of others' ways. Many recent and ongoing events should have taught us all that. How many art teachers find such strict and, perhaps, narrowing value systems to be equal to our own liberal ones? You see, if we are honest with ourselves, we may find a discordent element in our pluralism.

We must ask ourselves if we – the liberal-minded – can accept all beliefs systems as of equal value. For example, even at the safe distance of millennia, can we accept the Greek practice of infant exposure? Now days, can we accept the role that Islam sometimes assigns women? If we claim we can be universally accepting, are we perhaps asserting an intellectual imperialism that proclaims our values are better, that is on a higher level, than those ignorant folk that hold strongly to particularistic beliefs? Are we setting up a hierachal set of values ala Kohlberg?

Further, consider these issues:

If we were to enter some religiously-oriented community in which members of that community live in peace and harmony, with little crime and seeming acceptance of the particular rules and regulations set up in the name of the community's religion, would we be morally justified in introducing a world view that asserts that the "local belief system...simply no longer [washes]"?

If we have a number of different belief systems, whatever and regardless of their social consequences within the American culture, can we consistently present the judgment that each is "interesting" and "acceptable" and "equal"?

My fundamentalist parents were right about one thing. Art is important because images do proclaim values and do move the souls of humankind. In seeking to celebrate the diversity of humanity, we should not undermine that diversity, nor attempt a compromise of the passionate beliefs that are an ingredient of true diversity. We must be careful that our vision of multiculturalism does not turn into a toxic substance that will kill the spirits, the dreams of the many and the different.

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